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Valoria H. Loveland

Director

WSDA

Contact:

Leonard Eldridge, DVM

Washington State Veterinarian

(360) 902-1881

Did you know?

- Most avian influenza viruses are not a threat to human health
- Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza has never been detected in Washington
- Only humans in very close contact with diseased birds have been infected with avian influenza
- Quick human-to-human transmission of Asian H5N1 has not yet occurred and may never happen
- WSDA and partner agencies are closely monitoring the movement of H5N1 in domestic poultry and wild waterfowl around the world
- Normal cooking kills all avian influenza viruses
- No diseased birds will be allowed to enter the food supply under the WSDA response plan

Avian Influenza Surveillance and Response

Avian Influenza (AI), sometimes known as bird flu, is a viral disease that can affect most species of domestic poultry, as well as migratory wildfowl and shore birds. There are many different varieties of AI that frequently occur in Washington and around the world. The vast majority of these AI viruses are naturally occurring and low pathogenic (do not kill most infected birds) and do not impact human health.

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) is of greater concern to veterinarians and commercial poultry operations because of the large numbers of infected birds that can die from an outbreak of the disease. These diseases are highly contagious among birds and must be quickly contained to keep them from infecting other commercial or backyard flocks. To date, no HPAI has been detected in Washington. The human health impact of HPAI is minimal.

Global public health officials, however, are concerned about a strain of HPAI known as Asian H5N1. This strain has been shown to sicken and kill humans who contract the disease by living in close proximity to poultry or coming into contact with diseased birds. Fortunately, the current avian influenza viruses lack the ability to easily spread from person-to-person. The concern is that the virus could mutate to allow easy human-to-human transmission, precipitating a pandemic of Asian H5N1 in humans. It is important to note that this kind of quick human-to-human transmission of this particular virus has not yet occurred anywhere in the world and, in fact, may never happen.

The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) continues to work with state and federal partners to monitor the movement of this Asian HPAI H5N1 virus in domestic poultry and wild waterfowl. It has not yet been identified in North American bird populations, but Asian HPAI H5N1 could reach the U.S. a number of ways, including smuggled birds or bird products or by migrating wildfowl. *If this should occur, there are no immediate consequences for public health.*

To protect the health of the state's poultry flocks from all types of AI viruses, WSDA has established a surveillance and testing program in the state. Working with the major commercial poultry producers, backyard poultry owners and exhibitors, WSDA veterinary experts and food safety officials have developed an AI testing program and outbreak response plan. The Washington plan is patterned after national standards adopted by other poultry-producing states.

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What is being done to reduce the risk?

- WSDA and its stakeholders have developed an AI testing program and outbreak response plan
- Bird owners are being encouraged to prevent the mingling of domestic poultry with wild birds
- Bird owners should report signs of unusual illness among birds
- The WSU Puyallup lab tests sick and dead birds free of charge to ensure that HPAI is not present in Washington
- WSDA is testing eggs sold at Farmers Markets for AI antibodies
- WSDA conducts exercises with other agencies to improve response coordination between agencies
- USDA and WSDA are expanding outreach efforts to backyard bird owners and small-scale poultry processors
- The Washington Legislature and USDA are supporting WSDA's outreach with additional funding

Like all microorganisms, avian influenza viruses are killed through normal cooking practices. As an added protection to the consumer, no diseased birds would be allowed to enter the food supply under the current WSDA response plan.

Dr. Leonard Eldridge, Washington's state veterinarian, encourages bird owners to practice good biosecurity by preventing the mingling of domestic poultry with wild birds and minimizing contact between bird flocks. Also, bird owners are encouraged to report signs of unusual illness among birds, such as sneezing, coughing, nasal discharge, diarrhea, listlessness and sudden death. Bird owners can report disease to the state veterinarian's office, the U.S. Department of Agriculture or their local veterinarian.

In cooperation with the WSDA surveillance effort, the Washington State University Avian Health and Food Safety Lab in Puyallup conducts testing of sick and dead birds to ensure that HPAI is not present in Washington's bird population. The program is free to the poultry producer or backyard bird owner. Large commercial operations are currently developing their own national testing program, and WSDA is receiving some of this testing data on a cooperative basis.

Through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, WSDA staff has purchased eggs at Farmers Markets for testing for avian influenza antibodies. The presence of these antibodies can signal exposure of laying chickens to AI viruses. However, these antibodies pose no risk of infection to humans. The testing of eggs also occurs at the WSU Avian Health and Food Safety Lab in Puyallup.

WSDA continues to refine its response training to prepare for the possibility of a HPAI outbreak in Washington. In November 2005, WSDA sponsored an avian influenza exercise in Blaine, Washington. Participants included representatives from local, state, federal and tribal governments and Canadian animal health officials. The purpose of the event was to improve coordination between WSDA, our federal partners, state agencies, and local jurisdictions, and improve our working relationship with our counterparts in British Columbia.

In cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other partners, WSDA is expanding its outreach efforts to backyard bird owners and small-scale poultry processors. WSDA employees have attended state and county fairs to promote biosecurity practices and encourage participation in the state's surveillance efforts. The Washington Legislature and the U.S. Department of Agriculture have recently approved additional funding for this effort.